DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 039 CE 055 136

AUTHOR Nascimento, Geraldo
TITLE Illiteracy in Figures. Literacy Lessons.
INSTITUTION International Bureau of Education, Geneva (Switzerland).
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 17p.; For other "Literacy Lessons" booklets, see CE 055 128-167. Also available in French.
AVAILABLE FROM International Bureau of Education, P.O. Box 199, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Census Figures; Data Interpretation; Demography; *Developing Nations; Economic Development; Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; Females; Foreign Countries; *Literacy Education; Males; Program Development; *Research Problems; Rural Urban Differences; *Statistical Analysis; *Statistics; Validity
IDENTIFIERS International Literacy Year 1990

ABSTRACT

Global figures that reveal the magnitude of the problem of illiteracy in the world disguise great disparities. For example, most of the illiteracy in the world is in developing countries. Therefore, it is preferable, and more appropriate in terms of numerical importance, to concentrate the analysis of illiteracy on developing countries. Such analyses show that there are differences between groups of developing countries. For example, East Asian and South Asian developing countries had 70 percent of the world's population of illiterates in 1990. The countries of East Asia will show a drop in the number of illiterates and in the rate of illiteracy by the year 2000; the countries of South Asia will also show a drop, but will still have a higher illiteracy rate than in all other regions. The figures presented in summary form for these different regions obviously disguise significant differences between the countries of which they are composed. In 48 of the 102 developing countries considered, the illiteracy rate exceeds 40 percent. There are also large differences in the illiteracy rate in different areas of developing countries, between rural and urban populations, among age groups, and between the sexes. In many of these countries, no reliable census data are available. Data collection and analysis must be improved so that adequate literacy policy can be made and better literacy programs can be carried out. (KC)

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LITERACY LESSONS

CE 055 136

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Illiteracy in figures

by Geraldo Nascimento, Office of Statistics, Unesco

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ONE ADULT OUT OF THREE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

In 1990, in developing countries taken as a whole, one adult out of three will be illiterate. Behind this simple ratio, according to Unesco estimates, are nearly 921 million illiterate men and women, not to mention the 42 million illiterates found in developed countries. World-wide, the total of 963 million illiterates in 1990 will thus be by-and-large the same as in 1985 and will only decline slightly by the year 2000. In relative terms, that is, if the number of illiterates is compared to the total adult population, the illiteracy rate will continue to drop, reaching 22% by the year 2000.

These global figures, which reveal the magnitude of the problem of illiteracy in the world, disguise in fact great disparities. Above we already had a glimpse at the contrast between developed and developing countries with regard to literacy. At least according to its

TABLE 1. Number of adult illiterates (15 years and over) and rate of illiteracy

Regions	Number of illiterates (millions)			Illiteracy rate (%)		
	1985	1990	2000	1985	1990	2000
• World	965.1	962.6	942.0	29.9	26.9	22.0
• Developing countries broken down as follows:	908.1	920.6	918.5	39.4	35.1	28.1
- Sub-saharan Africa	133.6	138.8	146.8	59.1	52.7	40.3
- Arab States	58.6	61.1	65.8	54.5	48.7	38.1
- Latin America and the Caribbean	44.2	43.5	40.9	17.6	15.2	11.3
- East Asia	297.3	281.0	233.7	28.7	24.0	17.0
- South Asia	374.1	397.3	437.0	57.7	53.8	45.9
• Developed countries	57.0	42.0	23.5	6.2	4.4	2.3

Certain countries were classified as both Sub-Saharan African countries and Arab States.

Source: Office of Statistics, Unesco (Revised figures, 1989).

simplest definition (the inability to read and write a simple text) and from a strictly quantitative point of view, the amount of illiteracy in developed countries can be considered to be negligible: less than 5% of the adult population. The deviations from this average which may persist are, in reality, minimal.

It is therefore preferable, and more appropriate, in terms of numerical importance, to concentrate the analysis of illiteracy on developing countries.

Photo: Unesco/Dominique Roger.

The Yenimahalle Literacy Centre at Ankara, Turkey.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GROUPS OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

The numerical predominance of East Asian and South Asian developing countries is evident: 678 million illiterates in 1990, that is, 70% of the world's total, a relative figure which should last into the year 2000. If these two sub-regions are considered separately, East Asian countries will experience a drop in the number of illiterates and in the rate of illiteracy, to 24% in 1990 and 17% by the year 2000. Of course, this evolution is mainly attributable to demographic trends and the development of schooling in China which, because of its size, is predominant in this sub-region.

In South Asia, where demographically important countries are also to be found, one adult out of two will be illiterate; despite a significant decrease between 1985 and the year 2000, the illiteracy rate (46%) will still be higher than in all other regions.

Sub-Saharan Africa in 1990 will have 139 million illiterate inhabitants, representing slightly more than 14% of the world's total. Concerning the adult population, here as in South Asia, one adult out of two will be illiterate. However, if the trends revealed by this assessment are confirmed, this region's illiteracy rate will experience the largest decrease: 40.3% in the year 2000 as opposed to 59% in 1985.

Although the 61 million illiterates in the Arab States account for only 6% of the world total, they represent nearly 50% of the adult population of this group of countries. As in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, this rate should drop sharply, to 38.1% by the year 2000.

Lastly, of the developing countries, the region of Latin America and the Caribbean has the smallest number of illiterates and the lowest illiteracy rate, that is, only 11.3% by the year 2000.

In terms of perspectives for the year 2000, these figures indicate that although the illiteracy rates will drop to a relatively low level in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in East Asia, the magnitude of the problem will persist in other regions (South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab States).

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COUNTRIES

The figures presented in summary form for these different regions obviously disguise significant differences between the countries of which they are composed. Without going as far as to perform a detailed analysis of the differences existing in each of these regions, it is possible to examine as a whole the 102 developing countries for which Unesco was able to assess the illiteracy levels for 1990.

TABLE 2. Classification of 102 developing countries by number of illiterates and illiteracy rates in 1990

Number of illiterates	Illiteracy rate (%)						
	Less than 10%	10-20%	20-30%	30-40%	40-50%	50% and above	Total countries
Less than 500,000	9	5	3	1	4	2	24
500,000 to 2 million	4	7	4	4	3	10	32
2 to 5 million	1	2	1	4	3	13	24
5 to 10 million	—	2	3	1	2	4	12
10 million and over	—	1	2	—	2	5	10
Total countries	14	17	13	10	14	34	102

Source: Office of Statistics, Unesco (Revised figures, 1989).

In Table 2, the countries are classified simultaneously according to two criteria: on one hand, illiteracy rates; on the other, absolute numbers of illiterates. The diversity of situations can thus be better appreciated by

taking one extreme – the countries with small numbers of illiterates and low illiteracy rates – and the other – countries in which both indicators are very high. This first contrast is, moreover, the most striking. Nine countries have both less than 500,000 illiterates and an illiteracy rate under 10%. In the completely opposite situation, five contries are seen to have both an illiteracy rate over 50% and more than 10 million illiterates.

In forty-eight of the 102 developing countries considered, the illiteracy rate exceeds 40%. Of these forty-eight countries, twenty-nine are Sub-Saharan countries and four heavily populated South Asian countries.

The ten countries whose number of illiterates is estimated to be over ten million alone represent nearly 73% of the number of illiterates in the world (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Ten countries making up 73% of illiterates

Country	Illiteracy rate in 1990 (%)	Number of illiterates (millions)	Proportion of world total (%)
India	51.7	280	29.1
China	26.5	222	23.1
Pakistan	65.1	43	4.5
Bangladesh	64.7	42	4.4
Nigeria	49.2	29	3.0
Indonesia	22.9	27	2.8
Brazil	18.7	18	1.9
Egypt	51.5	16	1.7
Islamic Republic of Iran	46.0	15	1.5
Sudan	72.8	10	1.0
Sub-total (ten countries)		702	73.0
Other countries		261	27.0
World total		963	100.0

Source: Office of Statistics, Unesco

The level of development is not always homogeneous among various parts of a country, and, with regard to education and the educational levels of the population, significant regional differences continue to exist. Likewise, a country's adult illiterate population is revealed to be a mixed group, when, for example, its composition in terms of sex and age is considered. Other variables, such as unemployment, could also be taken into account, but at this level the analysis is limited by the statistical information made available by demographic censuses. These censuses are the main and often only source of data on illiteracy and cannot, given the complexity and cost of exhaustive demographic surveys, deal with all facets of the problem.

To illustrate these differences we will rely primarily on data put together by national censuses organized in the early 1980's (in general, these censuses are carried out every ten years). Most of these data are to be found in the *Compendium of statistics on illiteracy* (Unesco, 1988) or are published regularly in the Unesco Statistical Yearbook. The countries were selected, not to make up a 'representative sample', but in accordance with the data available and which best fit the purpose of this report. The poor representation of Africa in this 'sample' is explained by the absence of recent demographic censuses in many African countries and, to a lesser extent, by the fact that the results of some censuses are still unknown. These several remarks concerning the currentness of the data selected should not blind us to the great contrasts that they illustrate, and which bear witness to the magnitude of the problem.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL POPULATIONS

Since the regional composition of each country corresponds to specific criteria particular to that country, it is not easy (especially in the framework of this brief report) to compare regional disequilibria from one country to the next. However, although the definitions used in this regard by the various countries are not uniform, it is possible to look for differences between populations in urban and rural areas. More importantly, we are interested here in the differences between these two populations within a given country (Table 4).

In the majority of countries considered, illiteracy rates in rural areas are twice as high as in urban areas.

TABLE 4. Illiteracy rates (%) of urban and rural populations aged 15 years and over

Country	Rural area	Urban area
Afghanistan	85.3	62.5
Pakistan	82.6	53.1
Nepal	81.3	52.6
Togo	78.3	43.1
Bangladesh	74.5	51.8
India	67.3	34.9
Tunisia (age 10 +)	62.2	35.3
Brazil	46.3	16.8
Dominican Republic	43.0	20.9
El Salvador (age 10 +)	42.2	15.5
China	37.8	17.6
Indonesia	37.6	16.5
Malaysia (age 10 +)	32.0	19.0
Ecuador	27.3	6.2
Colombia	24.8	9.0
Philippines	23.1	6.9
Sri Lanka	15.2	6.6
Argentina (age 10 +)	14.6	4.1

Data are from censuses carried out between 1980 and 1982.

Source: *Compendium of statistics on illiteracy*, Unesco, 1988.

Between these two rates, a differential of 30% to the detriment of rural areas is sometimes to be observed. It should be noted also that the rural illiteracy rate is particularly high in certain countries (seven of the eighteen presented), thus showing us that three to four adults out of five in rural areas in these countries are illiterate. Allowing for the possibility that these figures may have changed slightly in the past several years, thanks in particular to improvement in school enrolment ratios, the rural illiteracy situation continues to be alarming, considering the fact that the countries mentioned include countries in which the rural population is numerically significant.

DIFFERENCES BY SEX

The differences in illiteracy according to sex are already sufficiently familiar and well-documented: invariably it is the females who have the higher rates of illiteracy. From this point of view once again, the differences in percentage between male and female vary from one country to the other. To give an idea of the differences between both sexes and countries, a summary of illiteracy rates by sex published by Unesco for eighty-seven developing countries in 1985 is given below:

- in thirty-six countries, all of which are situated in Africa and Asia, the difference between male and female illiteracy rates is over 20%;
- in twenty-six countries, nearly all of which are in Africa and Asia, the difference between the two rates is between 10 and 20%;
- lastly, in twenty-five countries, the majority of which are in Latin America and the Caribbean, the difference is less than 10%.

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ILLITERATES BETWEEN 10 AND 14 YEARS OLD

It is generally acknowledged that before the age of 15, children belong to the basic primary education category. As a result, adult illiteracy is only measured beginning with age 15. However, in many countries when adult literacy training centres are opened, it is not uncommon to see the arrival of young adolescents and pre-adolescents, or even of children who have not had access to primary school or had to drop out prematurely.

Certain censuses measure illiteracy among children aged 10 to 14, and the data in Table 5 give an idea of the proportions this phenomenon can reach, since, particularly in demographically important countries, the children in this situation can number several million. The picture is necessarily incomplete, because surveys on the subject in the majority of countries are lacking; hence, of the data available, we have retained only the most significant rates.

TABLE 5. Illiteracy among children aged 10 to 14.

Country	Illiteracy rate among 10 to 14 year olds (%)	Country	Illiteracy rate among 10 to 14 year olds (%)
Bangladesh	74.8	Brazil	25.8
Pakistan	74.0	Philippines	20.1
Afghanistan	61.5	El Salvador	20.1
Nepal	61.2	Tunisia	17.1
Mozambique	58.5	Malaysia	15.0
Haiti	51.6	Turkey	14.4
India	43.5	Colombia	13.9
Togo (12-14 years)	28.0		

Data from censuses carried out between 1980 and 1982 (with the exception of Tunisia: 1984).

Source: *Compendium of statistics on illiteracy*, Unesco, 1988.

It is nearly certain that children who are not presently in school will later join the ranks of adult illiterates. By way of information, Unesco estimates that in 1990, in developing countries as a whole, 386 million children and young people aged from 6 to 17 years will not be able to attend school.

Photo : Unesco/Almasy-Vevaey.

Learning to read at a Koran school in Nigeria.

DIFFERENCES BY AGE

Illiteracy manifests itself in very contrasted manners according to different generations. Table 6 attempts to illustrate this phenomenon in a certain number of countries. To simplify the presentation, basic data have been grouped into four age categories of unequal size. But the rigourous analysis of the original, basic data only confirms the trend towards higher illiteracy rates the higher the age of the population group, as indicated in Table 6. The older generations therefore, have the highest illiteracy rates, for they did not enjoy the same educational opportunities as do the younger generations in developing countries beginning relatively recently. One can note, moreover, that in a certain number of countries, the rate is relatively low for younger groups (less than 25 years old) and that, proportionately, illiteracy is currently concentrated in the oldest generations (45 years old and over). This difference is extremely revealing of the impact of schooling in these countries.

In other countries, however, the situation of young people aged 15–19 years and 20–24 years in terms of literacy continues to give cause for concern: the percentage of illiterates is very high and not far from the percentage observed for older portions of the population.

It is not within the scope of this report to explore the many aspects of differences in illiteracy according to age. It is however, entirely possible, on the basis of data from censuses, to analyse in greater detail the different situations which result when the age, sex and area (urban or rural) of residence of illiterates are considered together. Between the two extremes of illiteracy rate – an older woman in a rural area and a young man in an urban area – are many gradations of literacy, testifying

to the great complexity of the problem in its demographic aspects. 13

TABLE 6. Illiteracy rate by age group (%)

Country	Total 15 and over	15-19 years old	20-24 years old	25-44 years old	45 years old and over
Benin	83.5	64.5	75.8	#81.3	# 1.1
Afghanistan	81.8	67.2	73.0	84.8	90.7
Nepal	79.4	66.4	73.5	80.9	87.7
Mozambique	72.8	49.2	64.9	#74.4	#86.5
Bangladesh	70.8	64.2	64.5	70.8	78.7
Togo	68.6	39.1	#56.5	#73.4	#88.0
Haiti	65.3	44.9	53.2	68.6	78.6
India	59.2	44.6	48.0	#54.9	#69.8
Algeria	55.3	22.8	34.4	#47.7	#79.7
Tunisia	49.3	24.5	#21.9	#51.5	84.0
Uganda	42.7		#71.0		89.2
China	34.5	9.4	14.3	27.6	67.3
Turkey	34.4	13.8	17.1	31.3	60.0
El Salvador	32.7	16.6	19.8	30.4	52.3
Indonesia	32.7	13.1	16.3	#22.2	#51.1
Malaysia	30.4	10.5	15.3	35.0	66.0
Brazil	25.5	16.5	15.6	23.2	41.2
Kuwait	25.5	7.7	17.2	24.8	48.6
Peru	17.5	6.0	7.4	#11.7	#29.6
Mexico	17.0	7.1	9.3	16.2	31.6
Philippines	16.7	7.9	8.6	13.3	34.8
Ecuador	16.1	5.2	7.4	14.3	32.8
Venezuela	15.3	6.8	7.3	11.8	34.0
Sri Lanka	13.2	9.6	8.3	10.2	23.2
Paraguay	12.5	5.5	6.3	10.4	24.5
Thailand	11.9	2.9	3.4	7.1	32.0

Data are from censuses carried out between 1980 and 1982 (1984 for Tunisia and 1985 for Kuwait).

# of different age groups:

Benin and Algeria: 25-29 and 30+
Togo: 20-29, 30-49 and 50+
Uganda: 16-45
Mozambique: 25-39 and 40+
Tunisia: 20-34 and 44+
India, Indonesia and Peru: 25-34 and 35+

Source: *Compendium of statistics on illiteracy*. Paris, Unesco, 1988.

It is by further developing the analysis of the disparities evoked here and improving our knowledge of the complex reality of illiteracy that adequate literacy policies can best be defined and elaborated, with precise objectives and plans of action. One of the roles of statistics is to provide the quantitative elements required for this kind of reflection, but, unfortunately, in this sphere much remains to be done.

An example among others, but of capital importance, concerns the differences which can exist concerning the definition of illiteracy itself. Generally, all of the statistical data gathered and used until now have as their basis a simple dichotomy for the classification of individuals: between 'knowing how to read and write' and 'not knowing how to read and write', between 'literate' and 'illiterate', with no nuances, no intermediate degrees.

Another example, which is equally important: the method used for measuring illiteracy. As a rule, it is on

For statistical purposes, Unesco recommends the following definitions:

(a) Literate: *a person 'who can with understanding both read and write a short, simple statement on his everyday life';*

(b) Illiterate: *a person 'who cannot with understanding both read and write a short, simple statement on his everyday life';*

(c) Functionally literate: *a person 'who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development';*

(d) Functionally illiterate: *a person 'who cannot engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development'.*

the basis of a simple statement on the part of the individual concerned that the condition of literate or illiterate is determined. This method of self-evaluation facilitates the introduction of an element of subjectivity into replies. Without going so far as to radically modify or replace this method, literacy tests could be designed and applied to the population concerned within the framework of a special survey. The results of these tests would make it possible to monitor the relevance of the information obtained on the basis of self-evaluation procedures and to correct possible systematic errors. Even more importantly, reliance on this type of test would make it possible to go beyond the traditional dichotomy, to determine different levels of literacy, particularly of functional literacy.

Lastly, in many countries, particularly in Africa, the planning of literacy policies suffers enormously from the lack of an adequate, up-to-date statistical basis. The absence of recent population censuses or even partial surveys and the fragility of the few, scant, outdated statistics available render any effort to make a quantitative evaluation of illiteracy in all its dimensions difficult.

Eliciting information, or finding the resources required to gather it directly, are objectives which literacy policies and campaigns should also take into account.

This publication has been produced by the International Bureau of Education within the context of International Literacy Year, 1990.

The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by G. Nascimento of the Office of Statistics, Unesco, to the cause of literacy.

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